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THE INTERJECTIONS OF IMMOGENE SPARKHOUND

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

In

The School of Art

By
Christy Richardson
B.A., Louisiana State University, 1995
B.F.A., Louisiana State University, 1997
December 2002

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Abstract

“The Interjections of Immogene Sparkhound” is a collection of essays that examines the defining moments of a painting alter ego and then analyzes the rationalizations she creates for producing the works of art that follow.

Alter ego: a second self: as **a:** a trusted friend **b:** the opposite side of a personality

About a Girl

Knowing her is like watching TV. And when she works, she turns on a musical score, and it is much like watching MTV. It's the same way that the person on the television is watching herself in the form of a daydream, set against the landscape of driving a car or grilling a burger. She thinks to herself and a whole load of these images flash on the screen as if to say they're really in her head but she's showing them so she wants you to see them too. And the images are replays of moments in life - truthful, embarrassing, odd, and mundane. She replays them so she won't forget. They are her attempts and failures, her restlessness and shame. She uses vacant poses because they are best for everything and nothing all in a second. And it can last for hours or at least until her song ends. So, she orchestrates a sudden death, a medical mystery really, which can only be linked to the loss of her dog three days prior. Grounded, she finds her way out of the flashing image loop and wonders why she's making this mini movie of her life in her head anyway. It's a place where she envisions herself looking much better and sounding more interesting and eloquent than in actual life. It's because part of her wanted to be a rock star and the other part wanted to be president - the beginning of a life rich in incongruity.

You knew her as a child. At five, she was sent home from kindergarten for smuggling a shocking pair of cordovan go-go boots into a land of five thousand navy loafered school kids. She wasn't sure what drove her to it, but looking back, it was the first six months of thirteen years of private schooling that sent her over the edge. At six, she began dressing up the family golden retriever and at seven, designing her own

clothes. And in the frequent situation of having to wear a uniform, she designed her own hair instead. Her mother was never allowed to touch her hair again. She had extensively studied the configurations of small black girls' hair in church. They had the best braiding techniques of all the nation and she attempted to recreate a few. Young and impressionable but afraid of nothing, she wanted to know everything. She waited at night for God to talk to her and tell her how to use her life. She believed she could be an instrument. She wanted to be Joan of Arc, and the possibility of cutting off her hair and fighting for the suffering of mankind tasted more real than macaroni and cheese. She wouldn't be afraid; she could be a boy when she needed to.

Later in life, she discovered the value of wearing uniforms. It freed her mind to think about other things than what to wear. The imagination of Immogene was never unlike anyone else's except that it was, and still is, automatic. Her adolescent interjections sabotage all logic and credibility in the business of everyday life. Her incessant twists on reality are attempts to transform common matters into some sort of poetry. A girl I know once described the urge or need to try to create things as a debilitating disease. Designing, imaging, wanting to find visual stability is an obsession that keeps me awake at night, drives me to drink, or oftentimes worse, take in loads of sugar. It's sick and beyond my control. If it is a debilitating disease, mine has a proper name. I call her Immogene Sparkhound.

Gore Vidal: Every time I see good work, something inside me dies.

The Work

Coming back to school I had the difficult task of deciding which direction to take. I had a recent exodus from a town of a five thousand "artists". Most of what I saw made me want to puke. I don't mean for that to sound condescending but I was sick of "art." Hell, I was sick of my own art (if you could even call it that). Probably my biggest concern in my work was that I wanted to make something contemporary. I had sat through many art history classes admiring all of the greats and listened time and again to my professors saying things like "and the pose was set in high fashion of the time in order to commemorate the spirit of the day and age". I wanted to commemorate the spirit of my day and age. I wanted to take everything I had learned about the great artists before me and incorporate a freshness that winked at the Y2K. While I didn't want to look back at my work in thirty years and think "that was so 2000," I was beginning graduate school in January, 2000. To me, that was something to take note of. I needed a mix of old lessons and new looks. That was merely scratching the surface. What I wanted to find in my own work most was something intelligent but not exactly academic. There is a difference there but it's easy to get lost between the two. It's the dialogue between high and low culture. I have no idea if I've accomplished that here or not. The only way to continue, I figured, was to not remind myself too often of my original thoughts on the matter. I've built what I could and responded, and more often than not my responses to my own work were in the form of instantaneous contradiction and reevaluation. If I had to define in one word the glue that holds everything together at this point it would be disparity. My lack of attention span or focus or whatever you want to call it is an

obsession that fuels my work and prompts me to want to paint the next piece. A new painting becomes a new chance to do something opposite from the one before because by the end of each painting I can't help but be bored or dissatisfied with what I've done. A new painting is a new life. I start each one with a rebellion against the other. It's the only reason I can think of to continue.

Early on Ed Smith came to my studio for a critique. A lot of times critiques can be painful for me. I come out of them feeling totally misunderstood, extremely inarticulate, and one hundred percent inadequate. On this particular day that wasn't so much the case. I was probably trying to ramble on with excuses for what I'd made and he said, "You want to know what I think it's about? It's about freedom. That's what you're after here." Like a pimple drying in the night, I awoke with a renewed clarity. All the other trash I had been spewing out was an attempt to justify myself, and I was lying to everyone. I was an art liar. I felt forced into it. People take art and art reasons so very seriously. I've had my moments myself. There is so much to know, and I stand by the anthem that knowledge is power and the more you know the more you can create and the better you can paint. But, when caught in the storm of rhetoric – arty talk, as I like to call it, I often stop and ask myself if I really believe what I'm saying. Sometimes I just don't know. Other times I really don't believe myself at all. One thing I know for sure about art is that anything can be art. Anything has the possibility to be art if it is something to one person. Art to me really is about freedom. My own art is about the freedom to contradict.

Contradiction is something that has intrigued me for some time now. Before I painted I went to school for creative writing and I had this teacher that said something really absurd to me. I had been writing a short story about this girl who was crazy. She

was having real mental problems caused by her phobia of roaches; she heard these little roach voices that were chants really. Whole gangs of them lived in her house and took over after her boyfriend left. Most likely the short story was bad in a number of ways but his excuse for it not working was that something so serious such as insanity could not be funny. It was impossible, he said, for funny and insane to live in the same story.

“Impossible?” I thought to myself. I wasn’t buying it. Tell me I suck for some other reason. Please, tell me it was underdeveloped or grammatically incohesive. I didn’t care about that. Those rules I’m sure were broken. I just don’t believe that two disparate things cannot cohabitate. I’m a Gemini for crying out loud. That would mean my whole existence was “impossible”. The impossibility was for him not to allow himself to rethink what he already thought he knew. I began painting in 1996 and haven’t written anything I didn’t have to write since.

My biggest problem with writing was writing full stories. I could never give a clean and clear ending. Hence, my preference gravitated toward poetry. I was still confined by language though. I tried to make up a few words of my own but then no one really knew what I meant. This is why I prefer images to words. I can juxtapose images to create meaning but it doesn’t need to be so clear and come “full circle around” like in writing. “Full circle around” was my doom. It always ended up cheesy and predictable. I only like cheesy and predictable when it’s intentional. Then I pretty much rejoice in it. Painting with a suggestively narrative approach comes naturally to me. Free association is an uncontrollable habit really – a nervous tick, if you will, brought on by Immogene. All of my narrative is metaphorical for something else, and often there is more than one

layer. My natural propensity is to want to give enough, and take enough away to leave behind ambiguity. It helps to throw a little confusion in my pot of paradox.

People often ask me, “what is good?” This brings up a hairy question. It’s especially difficult when you believe, like I do, that anything is possible in art because there are no real rules or checklists there to follow or indicate something’s definitely good. To me, a good work of art seems to have a pulse, like a tiny heartbeat, and that pulse radiates out and taps you on the shoulder. It makes a connection, gives an experience that allows the viewer to say to themselves “I know that thing,” even if they only halfway know and make up the rest for themselves. That is for the viewer. For the person who sits alone in a room for hours on end and makes this stuff, it’s even more difficult to decide whether or not this thing that you’re spending all of your time with is worth anything at all. I wonder if you ever really know. I have yet to have that moment. My favorite metaphor for painting was told to me by my great mentor Michael Crespo. It’s like Double Dutch, jumping rope you know, in the same way that you’ll stand there for a really long time waiting for the perfect moment. And your hands may be steady in the air while your heels are rocking back and forth. About to jump, not about to jump...about to jump, not about to jump, you finally take the leap. Once you’re there you either bust or find yourself hopping, but you never know until you take the leap. There isn’t anything more like painting to me than that.

“Well you’re in your little room,
And you’re working on something good.
But if it’s really good,
You’re gonna need a bigger room,
And when you’re in your bigger room,
You might not know what to do.
You might have to think of
How you got started
Sitting in your little room. Da da da”

- The White Stripes

Sincerely, Immogene

Maybe today's the day. I will brush my hair with one hundred strokes –be neat and clean and more deliberate than yesterday. Maybe I'll be honest enough to admit to myself exercise is imperative and today I will run. I won't even forget my shoes this time. I'll take less sleep aids and eat more vitamins. I'll have more energy than I did yesterday but be less jittery and more congenial. I won't say too much or too little. I'll be unique but not weird, common but individual. I'll get to school early. I'll be the first one there. I'll paint all day long, bring my lunch and paint while I eat low fat, low carbs, low sugar. And even though my shows are on I won't even look up when they release the paternity test of Hope's baby. I will just listen while I paint. Maybe I'll successfully use blue today. I will make a glamorous but smart hue of blue for the first time and I won't get rid of it. I won't change it to red. I'll drink more green tea and less coffee. I'll floss. I won't hide. I'll clean my hands, clean my brushes, and invite people into my studio. I will be a better teacher. I'll be funny and not only to myself. Today's the day. I'll look at my work and I will not shudder. I will have spontaneous clarity and the insides of my sentences will be the outsides of my work. It won't be too obvious or opaque, and I'll find that edge between high and low art. I'll continue to paint until I spawn something good. Tomorrow I'll be better.



Image 1a: *Untitled*
Oil on canvas, 36" x 48"



Image 1b: *Untitled*
Oil on canvas, 36" x 48"



Image 2: *Lee Boy Richie*
Oil on canvas, 16" x 20"



Image 3: *Portrait of Hair (Documenting Richardson)*
Oil on canvas, 48" x 60"



Image 4: *The Fall of Joan*
Oil on canvas, 72" x 60"



Image 6: *Associated Press Photo*
Oil on canvas, 40" x 24"



Image 7: *It's Just You.*
Oil on Canvas, 72" x 56"



Image 8: *Untitled*
Oil on canvas, 72" x 72"

Vita

Christy Richardson was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on June 7, 1973. The last and only girl child to Bob and Kathy Richardson, she has two brothers, Jeff and David. Christy was raised in Baton Rouge where she attended St. Thomas More Elementary School and St. Joseph's Academy High School. She received a Bachelor of Arts in creative writing in May of 1995 and a Bachelor of Fine Arts in painting and drawing in December of 1997. Both of these were awarded from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. After some miscellaneous employment, Christy decided to return for the Master of Fine Arts degree, which will be received in December of 2002.